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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 CARACAS 001059

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [ELAB](#) [KDEM](#) [SCUL](#) [VE](#)

SUBJECT: YOUNG POLITICO CHALLENGES GOVERNMENT, OPPOSITION

CARACAS 00001059 001.2 OF 003

Classified By: Robert Downes, Political Counselor,
for Reason 1.4(b).

Summary

¶1. (C) Alexandra Belandia Ruizpineda is a 35-year-old leader of the small Caracas-based Grupo Cambio ("Group for Change") that gained notoriety in September 2005 for surreptitious placement of paper skeletons to protest Venezuela's deteriorating security environment. While the skeletons incident resulted in her being investigated for terrorism, Belandia believes the real reason for her persecution is the success of her youth-based movement's social work in poor Caracas neighborhoods, the supposed exclusive turf of the Chavistas. Belandia has also run afoul of traditional opposition politicians for her efforts to force the pre-candidates against Chavez in the upcoming elections to agree to a primary. Belandia, though still not a major opposition player, could potentially become a major target for the Chavez administration if her unorthodox movement gain strength. End summary.

Impeccable AD Credentials Open Doors

¶2. (C) Poloff met with Belandia April 12, after she had de-briefed PAS on her recent participation in a PAS-sponsored short-term fellowship at Georgetown University. Belandia's grandfather, Leonardo Ruiz Pineda, was a founder of the AD party, a communications minister for the "triennio" of Romulo Gallegos, and later resistance leader during the dictatorship of Perez Jimenez. Ruiz Pineda was assassinated by state security police in 1952, driving the Ruiz Pineda family into exile until AD's eventual assumption of power. Belandia's mother, Natacha Ruizpineda (taking the combined name of her famous father) ultimately pursued a career in politics,

serving as a Caracas council member representing the western (and largely poor) parts of Caracas. While the Ruizpineda family was financially ruined while resisting the dictatorship, Belandia's father built a successful real estate company, making her part of Venezuela's new rich class. Belandia's family traveled the country during her childhood proselytizing on behalf of AD. Belandia obtained a degree in Speech Communication from Boston Univeristy in 1995. She returned to Caracas in 1996 to pursue a political career, but quickly concluded that AD had become corrupt and had lost touch with the masses. She worked as a professor of communications at Santa Maria University, making contact with many students who would later become journalists. During this period, she began working on social projects in poor neighborhoods to build a network. She supported the Salas Roemer campaign against Hugo Chavez in 1998. She was present in the opposition marches of 2001-2002, including the tragic day of April 11, 2002, during which 17 people were killed. After Chavez won the August 15, 2004, recall referendum, Belandia, working with the Coordinadora Democratica, said she advocated taking to the streets to claim fraud the following day, but was dismissed by Coordinadora leadership. She subsequently decided, as many opposition leaders, to forsake unity and organize her own movement.

Grupo Cambio

13. (C) Belandia launched Grupo Cambio in 2004 with the mission of establishing a free and fair society in Venezuela.

Recognizing that Chavez' rise to power was the result of political errors of the previous regimes, especially exclusion of the poor, the group began its work on a volunteer public service program in hope of building support in poor communities. Most of Cambio's members are of

CARACAS 00001059 002.2 OF 003

university age. Belandia also began giving training in "non-violent theory" for opposition protests, arguing that opposition street marches had become futile. (Note: It was Belandia who organized the April 6 march to the Papal Nunciature, during which the protesters sat down in the street and held moments of silence, an uncommon Venezuelan protest tactic. Cambio's website, www.cambioyfuera.org, contains some of the non-violent techniques they advocate.) Belandia said the majority of her 2,500 members come from western Caracas, mostly due to her childhood contacts, and much of Grupo Cambio's social projects are carried out in poor areas.

She said she does not seek any publicity for her activities because it would undermine her credibility in the barrios (and make her look like a carpet bagger). She added that she believes the fight against Chavez is a long-term one, requiring careful, low-profile work.

Skeletons Propel Cambio To Fame

14. (C) After three students from Santa Maria University were killed while fleeing from a suspicious police checkpoint in June 2005 (known as "Caso Kennedy"), Grupo Cambio members placed paper skeletons at traffic lights throughout Caracas. The "Skeletons" phenomenon, which peaked in September, was intended to protest the lack of security in Caracas, Belandia asserted. There were Skeleton copycats in other states, she added, including in Zulia. When the government learned that Cambio was responsible, Belandia said she began to receive telephonic death threats from people identifying themselves as members of the state security police (DISIP). She said she had also identified a car apparently following her in Caracas as having been rented by a DISIP employee. Then, on October 20, Belandia's house was raided by members of counter-terrorism unit of the technical police (CICPC) and the prosecutor's office. She said the questions did not relate to the skeletons, however, but rather to her group's

social work in the western part of the city. She claimed that the prosecutor told her that his job was to "put her in jail" and that the facts of the case were irrelevant. Belandia said she now has CICPC investigations pending against her, but because they are counter-terrorism cases, she is not allowed to see the files.

Flack From Traditional Opposition

15. (C) Despite having good contacts with opposition players, who largely accept her for her family background, Belandia described a contentious relationship with traditional opposition parties. For example, her group circulated an open letter to the opposition pre-candidates advocating five demands from the National Electoral Council (CNE) for clean elections and a primary to pick the opposition candidate. The letter, which Belandia said had some 8,000 signatures, extended an invitation for the pre-candidates to attend an April 22 assembly to sign a pact agreeing to the primary. Belandia was surprised to learn, however, that former Coordinadora Democratica leader Enrique Mendoza had called for a march on the same day to the National Assembly, which is currently debating the appointments of new members of the CNE. When she questioned the safety of such a plan (the National Assembly is squarely in pro-Chavez territory), she claims that Mendoza said the opposition needed to "see some blood." (Comment: Belandia probably exaggerated this point, though in-your-face street demonstrations are a classic opposition tactic from the mass marches of 2002-2004.)

16. (C) Cambio has a deepening working relationship with Sumate. Belandia, for example, had coordinated her advocacy for a primary with Sumate, the organization that would presumably administer the unofficial vote (Venezuelan electoral law has no provisions for primaries). For example,

CARACAS 00001059 003.2 OF 003

Belandia came out on April 17 after a meeting with Sumate and leaders of Gente de Petroleo (comprised of former PDVSA workers) to press for a unified candidate. Sumate leaders, then, held a press conference on April 18 expressing their readiness to facilitate the primary process.

Comment

17. (C) Belandia is politically savvy and confident but still somewhat young by Venezuelan standards to be taken seriously by most players. She may also overestimate her links to the barrio, especially given her eastern Caracas look (read, of European descent) and lifestyle. That said, she probably has the right formula for Venezuela's new opposition: low-profile social work coupled with long-term political network-building. Of course, this formula makes sense to us, but is so far little heeded in most opposition sectors. We suspect that Belandia's focus on youth is troubling to the Bolivarians, who like the traditional opposition struggle to co-opt youth into today's political landscape. We also expect that Belandia could get moved up to the Chavistas' A-list for political persecution (and prosecution) if she continues to rise in popularity.

BROWNFIELD